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ABSTRACT

Observations of innovative compensatory intervention programs in three Greek elementary schools were conducted in 1986. Implemented in 50 schools and offering help to 1,176 students, the innovation offered assistance through compensatory teaching to children, mainly second grade students, who were experiencing learning difficulties. This report provides descriptions of: (1) the schools; (2) ways in which teachers operated; (3) children's background; (4) parents' attitudes; and (5) initial results of the intervention; the objectives of the innovation project are outlined as well. Of the 1,176 children provided compensatory instruction, 54 percent were able to follow the lessons in their regular classes without additional extra coaching. All the prerequisites for the continued success of the program have been identified by those involved in the project. Concluding remarks offer recommendations for maintaining the quality of the programs. (RH)

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Project No. 8:
"Innovation in primary education"

The contact school plan

Visit to the Greek contact school

128th Primary School, Athens
(Greece)

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COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION (CDCC)

Project No. 8 on
"Innovation in Primary Education"

THE CONTACT SCHOOL PLAN

Visits to the Greek Contact School
128th Primary School, Athens

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Contact School Plan

The establishment of the Contact School Plan was decided by the Project Group, in order to provide the members of the Project Group with first-hand information, regarding the innovations implemented in the various countries of Europe. Twelve schools from twelve different countries participated in the plan.

More specifically, the aims and objectives of the Contact School Plan, as formulated at the Malta 1984 Project Group meeting, were the following:

- To bring together schools involved in comparable types of innovation.
- To enable the Project to take into account the results of experiences.
- To "feed into" the Project the reactions of teachers, educators, and parents to the ideas and proposals resulting from the more theoretical and conceptual work of the Project.

1.2 Time and framework of the visits

Five members of the Project Group were assigned the responsibility to act as liaison between the Project Group and the Contact School Plan. The members of this restricted group were also assigned the responsibility of submitting evaluation reports for the various Contact Schools. My assignment, as member of the restricted group, was to visit the Greek and the Swedish Contact Schools and submit relevant reports.

The visits to the Greek Contact School were realised on two occasions, in combination with the fulfilment of other functions given to me by the Council of Europe.

The first visit took place on 7 February 1986, after a visit to Strasbourg, where there had been a planning session for a seminar on "The role of the headteacher in innovation in primary schools", which I conducted later in June, in the Donaueschingen Academy. The second visit was on 18 June 1986, on my way to Donaueschingen. Through this combination it was managed to save some money, because the extra transportation fares (Cyprus-Greece-Cyprus) were avoided.

On the first occasion I visited the 87th School and Zanion School, and on the second occasion I visited the 128th School.

2.0 SCHOOLS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

2.1 The Schools

During the 1983-84 school year the project started in only one school in Athens, the 128th Primary School. During the following year (1984-85), the innovation was implemented in 50 schools, in various parts of the country, offering help to 1,176 children.

2.2 Objectives of the Project

The overall aim of the project was to help primary school pupils to overcome learning difficulties, through compensatory teaching. More specifically, the objectives set at the beginning of the project were the following:

- To help pupils with mild to moderate learning difficulties to reach the educational level of their class and become able to continue their contact with the regular educational process.

- To help the teachers of children with learning difficulties to understand the problems and peculiarities of such children, change their attitudes, expectations and practices, and facilitate their work.

- To help the parents become aware of the special learning needs of their children, appreciate the necessity of compensatory teaching and increase their co-operation with the school.

- To assist the school authorities increase their sensitivity and interest with such children and adopt the innovation.

- To convince the local and central authorities to adopt the innovation.

- To enable the public to increase its awareness of the need for compensatory teaching.

3.0 DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

3.1 The arrangements

Two of the schools which I visited, the 87th and 128th, are located in heavily populated areas and the children's attendance is arranged in shifts. This very fact gives the measure of space availability. Obviously, space is very limited. The third school, Zanion, is more privileged from the point of view of space availability.

The arrangements usually made in all schools are as follows: A certain number of children with learning difficulties are identified. These children leave their regular class for one or two hours each day and they go to another room, where another teacher gives them extra help in language and mathematics. There is a genuine effort not to segregate these children from their classmates.

3.2 How teachers operate

The teachers of the regular class are still regarded responsible for these children with learning difficulties. Efforts are made for close co-operation between the teachers of the regular classes and the teacher responsible for the coaching programme. This effort is co-ordinated by the headteacher and the school adviser.

Children with learning difficulties have been identified from different grades, but the emphasis has mainly been concentrated on the second graders, the philosophy being that the earlier these children are properly assisted, the more hopes there are to overcome their problems. Only a few (4-5) children go to the "Coach" each time, usually those having the same problems. The teacher uses a variety of materials and individualised approaches.

3.3 Children's background and parents' attitude

Usually these children with learning difficulties come from very low socio-economic backgrounds and live in heavily populated areas. Apart from the poor educational background of the parents of these children, the teachers who studied all the cases attribute these learning difficulties to some other factors too, such as: irregular attendance, lack of maturity and readiness, slow learning, failure in the teaching methods, over-populated classes, migration, lack of parents' interest, etc.

When the project started some of the parents responded negatively because of prejudice and lack of proper information. Later on, when they realised the actual benefits and progress of their children, they appreciated it and co-operated accordingly.

3.4 Some first results

As it was mentioned earlier, during 1984-85 about 1,176 children in all 50 schools attended the programme. From these children, 638 (54%) were able to follow the lessons in their regular classes, without needing the extra coaching any more.

Although this is a very rough and general evaluation, it gives a taste of the positive results of the project. Similar positive opinions were collected through a survey from the children, the parents, the teachers, the headteachers and the school advisers.

4.0 OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Essential prerequisites

All the prerequisites for the successful implementation of the programme under discussion, which are mentioned below, have been identified by the people involved in the project and have come to my attention either through personal contacts which I had with the teachers and advisers or through the various written documents which are handed to me by the school adviser, responsible for the project, Mr Stratis Koromilas.

I would like to congratulate them for the thorough study they have done for the identification of these prerequisites. The reason I mention them here is to emphasise that I endorse these prerequisites and to add my voice to the request for securing them. They are:

- Early identification of the children with learning difficulties.

- An extra room, fully equipped with the necessary instruments and materials. The furniture and general decoration should create a pleasant environment, which will attract children and facilitate learning.

- An extra teacher, properly trained and willing to undertake this responsibility of coaching children with learning difficulties. This teacher should be enthusiastic and have a special interest in these children. He should also be ready to co-operate closely and constantly with the parents and the teachers of the regular classes of these children.

- Close and constant co-operation between the extra teacher, the teachers, the headteacher, the school adviser and the parents.

- Children attending the coaching programme should not feel as having abandoned their regular class, but as organic members of it.

- The teachers of regular classes should feel responsible for the development of the children who attend the coaching programme and co-operate closely with the coach.

4.2 Recommendations

My first and very strong recommendation is the securing of the above-mentioned prerequisites by all those in charge (authorities, teachers, parents, etc). Without those prerequisites the project cannot achieve its objectives. Some other basic recommendations are:

- The extra teacher (the coach) should concentrate on his pupils and not substitute for teachers absent from school for one reason or another when there is such a need. The job which the coach is doing is a very hard and responsible one, demanding continuity and consistency, and this should be well understood by everybody.

- Children attending the coaching programme should not feel isolated and segregated. They should always feel that their normal place is in the regular class, with their classmates, and that they are accepted and respected, both by the teacher and the pupils as equal members and not marginal ones.

- Through the various discussions and the written documents, I got the impression that there is a need for a re-examination of the way the so-called "special classes" function. It seems that the contemporary philosophy of the integration principle contradicts some aspects of these "special classes".

- Special attention should be given to (a) proper in-service training of teachers and (b) adequate information, sensitisation and involvement of parents.

- The teachers of the "regular classes" should make sure that they pay the essential attention to all children of their class and that they are not released from the responsibility of the children attending the coaching programme. The "regular class" teacher, through individualisation of instruction and other methods, should make sure that the potential of each child is reaching its maximum.

- A general recommendation is that, from the experience gained, there is no doubt that this coaching serves a very important aim and that it should be continued and further developed. I respectfully submit the request to the competent authorities to look into the whole project carefully, and I am sure that they will be convinced about the many positive aspects of it.

5.0 EPILOGUE

Projects like the one under discussion cannot be evaluated with one or two short visits. What has been mentioned in these few pages are some impressions from an outsider.

The very fact that the need was identified for such a programme and an effort started with some schools is a very good beginning. There is, of course, much room for improvement. But this will follow gradually and naturally, after the first experience gained and the identification of the problems encountered.

I would like to congratulate the teachers, headteachers, and school advisers involved in the project for their willingness to try something new, and the extra effort made by them. Special congratulations go to Mr Theofrastos Gerou, the permanent member of the Project Group, who had the original idea of the innovation, and to the school advisers: Stratis Koromilas, George Mavroides, Nicos Scopas and Elias Kalloniatis, who acted as co-ordinating committee.

Finally, I would like to extend my warm thanks to Mr Theofrastos Gerou, Stratis Koromilas, George Mavroides, Elias Kalloniatis and Nicos Vlachos for their kind hospitality during my visits to Athens.